## FEATURE

## Fighting—Cancer

Former Oscar Co. DI, Staff Sgt. Deborah Ham, was only 24 years old when she was diagnosed, but for the last nine months she has faced cancer with hope, faith and support from those who love her.

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"Marines taking care of their own" is an ethos that the Marines and drill instructors of 4th RTBn., exemplified while supporting one of their own who was diagnosed with breast cancer last

In support of former Oscar Co. Drill Instructor Staff Sgt. Deborah Ham, who has continued to battle cancer for the last nine months, a group of 4th RTBn. Marines and fellow drill instructors traveled to San Diego to present her with the Marine Corps Drill Instructor Ribbon in a ceremony March 16.

Although Ham had not yet served the required three years in order to receive the ribbon, her fellow drill instructors believed she fully deserved it for all the hard work she put forth while on the drill field.

"We felt that she was one of us, and she'll always be one of us," said Gunnery Sgt. Robin Fortner, an Oscar Co. series gunnery sergeant. "It wasn't like she gave up or anything."

Ham, who spent 13 months prior to her diagnosis "pushing platoons all day long" in order to make them Marines, was happy to have received the ribbon that she worked so hard to obtain.

"It's something I always wanted to get. I feel happy and glad ... I'm excited," said Ham of the award that was presented to her by the battalion commanding officer, Lt. Col. Kimberly Johnson, and the battalion sergeant major, Sgt. Maj. Denise Kreuser.

Ham's struggle with cancer began more than two years ago. She instinctively knew there was something wrong with her health when she consulted the doctors in January 2002, but all of them labeled her condition a simple "blood clot" and told her it would eventually go away.

Ham, then a sergeant, did not believe them.

"The doctors told me everything was fine," she explained of her repeated trips to the doctor in search of a real answer. "They told me everything was all right and that it would go away, and that it was only a blood clot." The doctors were wrong.

A year-and-a-half later, an opinion by another doctor confirmed her fears, and the "blood clot" located in her right breast was actually stage four breast cancer, a malignant tumor that had already spread to her major organs.

Every three minutes a woman in the United States is diagnosed with breast cancer, which is the second leading cause of death in women in the United States, according to www.breast-cancer.org. In June 2003, then 24-year-old Ham had become one of them.

"I was mad because I went to the doc-

tors so many times and everything was 'fine,'" said Ham over the phone, her once booming drill instructor voice now replaced by a softer one, seemingly devoid of energy.

Learning of Ham's diagnosis shocked

Learning of Ham's diagnosis shocked everyone she worked with, especially her fellow drill instructors with whom she was closest.

"I was definitely surprised because she was so young and we both worked a lot of hours and did the same thing, and I had no idea that she was going through that," said Staff Sgt. Sandra Center, a fellow drill instructor who is close friends with Ham.



Lance Cpl. John Cosentino

Staff Sgt. Deborah Ham, a former Oscar Co. drill instructor who was diagnosed with breast cancer in June 2003, poses with fellow Marines from 4t RTBn. and MCRD San Diego after being presented with the Marine Corps Drill Instructor Ribbon in a ceremony in San Diego March 16.

ened her spirit.

"She's a wonderful person, and she's always upbeat and high spirited," said Staff Sgt. Subrina Dickerson, an Oscar Co. drill instructor who graduated from DI School with Ham in July 2002. "We worked together our first cycle, and she was always optimistic and in a good mood. We could always look to Ham for a smile to get us through the day. Despite what she's going through, she's been in high spirits and I'm glad she's doing really good."

"I talk to her at least a few times

have a relapse.

"I want to go back, but I'm not going to be able to because my doctor won't let me," said Ham. "I'm getting better, but I still have cancer. They don't want to let me in because they think it's going to make it react because it's stressful."

Being away from her family and friends, and "seeing the difference" in her recruits upon graduation is what saddened her the most when having to leave the drill field behind, but God, friends and family helped get her through it all, she said.

"I want to thank everyone for all the support I've gotten, especially the ladies from 4th Battalion, they've been awesome," said Ham.

Ham's fellow Marines continue to remind her that although she may be gone from the drill field, she is certainly not forgotten.

"They call me up and they send me stuff through the mail ... their prayers, they've been awesome," she said. "They make me feel like I'm still there, so that's pretty cool."

Ham is in the final stage of her cancer—there is no stage five – and although the doctors initially gave her only a couple of years to live, she will continue to remain optimistic and fight the cancer with the support of her friends and family, she said.

"Having cancer is a struggling battle, but I try to keep my head up and stay motivated and not let it get me down," said Ham. "I'm going to keep fighting this 'til the end."

## Breast Cancer Statistics

- One in eight women or 12.6% of all women will get breast cancer in their lifetime.
- Mammograms can detect cancer up to two years before a lump can be felt.
- Eighty percent of women who develop breast cancer have no family history of the disease.
- An estimated 182,800 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed in the United States this year, making it the most frequently diagnosed cancer among
- Breast cancer is currently the second leading cause of cancer death in women, with an estimated 41,200 women losing their lives to this disease.
- More than 97 percent of women whose breast cancer is found and treated early with no spreading beyond the breast, will survive.
- Breast cancer risk increases with age and every woman is at risk.
- \* Information courtesy of the Arizona Cancer Center.

## "Having cancer is a struggling battle, but I try to keep my head up and stay motivated and not let it get me down. I'm going to keep fighting this 'til the end."

- Staff Sgt. Deborah Ham, a drill instructor who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003.

Having been faced with the grim reality of her deadly cancer, Ham then hung up her campaign cover, left in the middle of her third platoon cycle and traveled to San Diego, where she began her chemotherapy treatment.

"There are some days when you can't really do anything," said Ham of her treatments. "It just depends on the days."

Those who know her best say that even though the cancer may have weakened her health, it has not weakevery week, and she is getting better," added Center. "I couldn't really tell you what her actual diagnosis is now, but she's definitely gotten better since day one."

What used to be one chemotherapy treatment every week has since dwindled down to one treatment every three weeks, according to Ham.

Although her health has gotten better since she began her treatment, she will not be able to return to the drill field because doctors feel she may